Staging *Thebans*

Omnibus interviews Julian Anderson

In 2014, composer Julian Anderson's first opera, *Thebans*, received its world premiere at the English National Opera. Playwright Frank McGuinness wrote the three-act libretto based on Sophocles' three Theban plays: *Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. *Omnibus* sent Matthew Nicholls to talk to Julian about his background in Classics, and how he worked to adapt Sophocles' work for the operatic stage.

What background in Classics do you have?

I had a really inspirational head of Classics at school, a man called Theo Zinn, a great influence on me and on my eventual writing of *Thebans*. Through him I learned a great deal about how humanly fascinating and meaningful Classical literature could be, as well as its capacity for brain-stretching.

But I knew at school that I was going to be a musician – I was already writing symphonies in my head, during boring school football matches. I wanted to do French and German A-levels, a logical choice for a musician. But my stepfather wanted me to take Latin and Greek. Our teacher insisted that by end of our spring vacation we had to have translated the whole set text of *Oedipus the King*. That was a lot of work for a reluctant 16-year-old classicist! I did almost no music that vacation – every day I spent about eight hours grinding through this play.

One fine spring morning in 1984 when I was longing to be outside or doing anything other than this, frankly, I was ploughing through the exchange between Tiresias and Oedipus where Tiresias says 'there's no point in my saying anything at all; take me away, I'm going home', and Oedipus is outraged and they have a very sharp dialogue. So I was translating this and remember distinctly writing out the phrase 'You would provoke anger in a stone'. O Christ! I thought, I've got it wrong again, that's obvious nonsense. But then it hit me with tremendous force that this was what was being said; I couldn't believe that 2500 years ago someone could have written such a vivid phrase.

My next thought was, 'this character wants to sing – wouldn't that line work well, when sung?' I knew immediately that I wanted to do an opera based on this play. That schoolboy plan was the genesis of the opera, more or less as I eventually did write it. Sometimes you know when something is going to be a good plan, and will work.

So though in some respects I was hampered in my progress by having to spend all those hours translating Greek and doing no music, I do owe it a lot.

How did you come to invite Frank McGuinness to write the libretto?

Once the English National Opera had commissioned the opera from me in 2007, the next stage was to find a writer. This was complicated. ENO suggested Frank McGuinness, who had adapted *Oedipus the King* for the National Theatre [McGuinness won the Classical Association Prize in 2011 for his 'significant contribution to the public understanding of Classics'– ed.]. I went to see it, and I liked it. But I did not feel that it was what I wanted to do. I wanted to work with someone who had a fresh view. So I said no.

But I was persuaded to meet with Frank, and within 3 to 4 minutes of the meeting starting I knew I'd found my man. First of all, I liked him enormously; that was quite clear. And secondly we looked at a long speech of Oedipus about a third of the way through. I said that it would need to be shortened. Frank said he could shorten it to just six lines, and sat down and did it in front of me. And I read the six lines, and said 'That's absolutely perfect, I could set those tomorrow'. Frank's writing is songful, it needs to be sung.

What about those lines makes the music singable?

Frank's lines suggested sung voice to me. He writes with a beautiful ear for language, and can retain that while shortening a text, which is essential for opera, which is generally more intense than a play. That's why it has fewer words; the music can tell you more.

Instead of weakening Sophocles, it seemed to me that Frank's briefer versions were even more colourful.

Can you give me an example?

*No worse, no worse, there is none
Than I have done.*

This comes at the end of Oedipus' aria, after he has blinded himself. Frank's language here is fragmented, keening, sympathetic. I set it as a sort of blues, a modern musical way of expressing grief; I used my own chords but I took gestures and atmosphere from blues singers, like Sarah Vaughan or Ella Fitzgerald.

I was very struck by that couplet but only after I had finished the opera I realized it was a very near quote from Gerald Manley Hopkins, another very musical poet of ecstasy and tragedy Frank had mentioned to me at our first meeting. I was very touched by that.

And of course that line which gave me my first inspiration, 'You would provoke anger in a stone', ended up in the opera; not particularly stressed, but it's there.

The story of *Thebans*, and the plays, are well known. Did you try to approach them with a fresh view?

Yes. I realized that these are of course very famous plots – myths are, they're shared, they're communal plots. An advantage of myth is that it's not a great surprise what's happening, so the imagination goes into how you present them – how fast, how slow, what sort of angle do you have on this? This allows you much more latitude as a composer, because you have to think about your own take, or presentation.

For example, in my opera I changed the order of the plays. I had seen the Theban trilogy staged many ways in the supposedly right order. But remember: *Oedipus at Colonus* was written towards the end of Sophocles' career; *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King* earlier. The fact that Sophocles wrote *Oedipus at Colonus* so late on meant that it must have been about his own old age – how can it not end the evening? It's the end of everything. So I moved the *Antigone* into the second act, and ended with Oedipus' death in the *Oedipus at*

Colonus.

There's so much in these plays that strikes resonances with politics, with history, with other characters from literature. The audience shouldn't be thinking about oldness, antique characters, legends – but about human characters. The more you go into these myths the more they feed back to you. The resonances are endless. I had lived with the stories in my life for more than 30 years and couldn't have written the opera without that.

So what sort of resonances did these characters, or plots, strike for you?

In Creon, I see for example the ascent of Stalin in Soviet Russia. Stalin ascended by doing favours and then calling them in; everyone who met Stalin agrees that he was a man of immense charm. He presented himself as a practical man who can get things done, just don't ask how. Creon is that character.

Oedipus meant to be a great hero but we see enough of him in acts one and three to know that he has distinct flaws – in act three he beats up his son, he offers a curse on his home city; he is impetuous, bad tempered, he jumps to conclusions. These flaws are just part of human nature.

How are those characters expressed in your music?

Take Creon, who we just mentioned. To reflect that personality and character I gave him unnecessary roulades and vocalises and little flourishes; they are there just to show off his voice, to be smooth – a lyric tenor. Harmonically he has lots and lots of major triad chords, a harmonic texture associated in western music with happiness, contentment, resolution, a positive optimistic chord. But they are all the wrong order, all jumbled up and not where you expect them to be, and funnily accented, too. So there is deviousness as well as suavity. There's something convincing about him, and lots of people can be fooled; but if you listen carefully you can hear he is perverted, off-true, and out for only one thing, himself.

Did you find an overarching theme in the plays, or the opera?

Frank McGuinness has said that it's about the failure of fathers, failures of family communication. It's also about love (destructive as well as tender). There's really only one duet where we see love in action, in Act 3 when Antigone is released by Creon's guards and runs back to her father, and they have a tender duet – the good side of fatherhood, and family. But there's plenty of evidence in the opera for the bad side of family.

Power is another key phenomenon. Creon's true interest is power. Act 2 is about his police state, symbolized with mechanical music running right through the act with streams of crotchets as the Chorus sing 'Your Word Is Law' – they have become automata. It's all notated as individual notes, which march away row upon row in the orchestral score. It looks like the bars of a prison on the page, and was meant to sound oppressive.

The mystical angle on Oedipus' psychology in Act 3 is also very important to me. Oedipus, though blind, knows the grove is the place as soon as he enters. That's one of several very mysterious 'second sight' type bits of knowledge that Oedipus displays. At the end he even leads them to his own death. Sophocles' portrayal of his death is clearly a mystical event, like a transfiguration; it influenced later Christian thoughts about death and resurrection. We see Oedipus walk off in a blaze of light, but what the actual death is no one is allowed to see. This triggers Antigone's lament, because she is not allowed to go and see him die.

I drew on personal experience for that. While I was writing this part of the opera my father was very unwell, suffering from dementia, and I was teaching abroad at Harvard. I had a telephone call – he'd gone downhill rapidly, and I should come at once. While I was waiting in the airport he died, so I never saw him again. And as he was in a hospital, his room was cleared, and I never saw the place he died. So I felt very complicated about that – and it has a big resonance for me, that last speech. 'I am going to die now, but you can't come and see me do it, or the ground where I die'. 'Father' is the last word of the opera, sung by Antigone on a big high C that silences the orchestra. And there's a very quick dim of the lights: a bit of stagecraft so the audience knows it's the end, and to trigger the applause.